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Message Text

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73
ACTION AF-08

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-02

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FM AMEMBASSY LAGOS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 4660
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E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: PFOR, PINS, NI, UK
SUBJECT: GOWON CASE, THE LAGEST ROUND

REF: LAGOS 4780

SUMMARY: FMG HAS ANNOUNCED SUSPENSION OF BENEFITS BEING PAID TO FORMER HEAD OF STATE GOWON AND HAS REITERATED THAT HMG SHOULD NOT ALLOW GOWON ISSUE TO "ADVERSELY AFFECT" RELATIONS BETWEEN NIGERIA AND BRITAIN. NEVERTHELESS, PESSIMISM ABOUT CHANCES OF EXTRADITION ATTEMPT IS GROWING AND FMG MAY BE PREPARING A NEW TACK. END SUMMARY.

1. STATEMENT RELEASED APRIL 27 SAYS FMG "WISHES TO KEEP THE NATION INFORMED OF THE EFFORTS SO FAR MADE TO GIVE YAKUBU GOWON EVERY OPPORTUNITY TO DEFEND HIMSELF AGAINST THE SERIOUS CHARGES OF MASTERMINDING AND COMPLICITY IN THE ABORTIVE COUP PLOT OF 13TH FEBRUARY 1976." IT DESCRIBES PROPOSAL BY GOWON THAT BOARD OF INQUIRY SHOULD MEET WITH HIM IN UK OR SOME NEUTRAL COUNTRY, BUT REJECTS IDEA, SAYING THAT IT WOULD NOT BE PRACTICAL TO TAKE THE WITNESSES WHO HAD IMPLICATED GOWON TO THE UK OR ANYWHERE ELSE TO CONFRONT HIM.

2. FMG SAYS BRITISH GOVERNMENT HAS "ALLUDED TO DIFFICULTIES IT
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WOULD ENCOUNTER IN MEETING THE REQUEST OF THE FMG AND HAS

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OFFERED TO DISCUSS THE MATTER. THE FMG IS ANXIOUS THAT THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT SHOULD NOT ALLOW THIS ISSUE TO ADVERSELY AFFECT THE RELATIONS BETWEEN THIS COUNTRY AND BRITAIN."

3. STATEMENT RECOUNTS HOW FMG HAS "ACCORDED EVERY RESPECT AND FACILITY TO YAKUBU GOWON," PAYING HIS PENSION REGULARLY, PAYING RENT FOR HIS HOUSE AND MAINTAINING A SERVANT AND NANNY FOR HIS HOUSEHOLD. FMG HAS NOW DECIDED TO SUSPEND ALL THESE BENEFITS UNTIL GOWON IS WILLING TO COOPERATE WITH THE INVESTIGATION. STATEMENT CONCLUDES THAT "OPPORTUNITY BEING OFFERED TO GOWON TO DEFEND HIMSELF AND CLEAR HIS NAME MAY NOT BE PROLONGED INDEFINITELY. THE FEDERAL MILITARY GOVERNMENT WISHES TO DE-TERMINE AND EXPEDITIOUSLY DISPOSE OF ALL ISSUES ARISING FROM THE ABORTIVE COUP OF LAST FEBRUARY."

4. AWOLOWO'S /TRIBUNE/ COMMENTS APRIL 29 THAT SUSPENSION OF FACILITIES PROVIDED TO GOWON IS VERY MILD PUNISHMENT, CALLS FOR GOWON'S DISMISSAL WITH IGNOMINY FROM NIGERIAN ARMED FORCES, CONFISCATION OF ALL HIS ASSETS IN NIGERIA, DECLARATION THAT GOWON IS WANTED MAN. BUT /TRIBUNE/ESCHEWES CLAMOR FOR HARSH MEASURES AGAINST UK, SAYS NIGERIANS AND FMG SHOULD ACCEPT REALITY "THAT THERE IS NO POSSIBILITY OF (GOWON'S) BEING EXTRA-DITED" FROM UK. "ANY BRITISH GOVERNMENT WHICH DEPORTS A REFUGEE TO HIS COUNTRY TO FACE LIKELY DEATH WILL BE BROUGHT DOWN BY A VOTE OF NO CONFIDENCE IN THE BRITISH PARLIAMENT WITHIN A WEEK, OR ALTERNATIVELY LOSE THE NEXT ELECTION." /TRIBUNE/ OPPOSES TRIAL OF GOWON IN ABSENTIA, SAYING IT WOULD BE A MOCKERY WHICH WOULD MAKE NIGERIA A LAUGHING STOCK OF THE CIVILIZED WORLD. IT SAYS FURTHER THAT FMG SHOULD DELAY NO LONGER IN BRINGING REMAINDER OF ALLEGED PLOTTERS TO TRIAL. "IT IS TIME THE AFFAIR PASSED INTO HISTORY. IT IS TIME THE GOVERMENT GAVE THE COUNTRY A NEW / . . . DIRECTION."

5. OTHERS ARE ALSO HAVING SECOND THOUGHTS ABOUT WISDOM OF PRESSURING BRITISH TO RETURN GOWON. IBADAN CRIMNOLOGIST DR. H. O. KUSSAMOTU TOLD/SUNDAY SKETCH/, "IF WE BRING POLITICAL, DIPLOMATIC AND ECONOMIC PRESSURES . . . AGAINST BRITAIN, WE SHALL LOOK . . . RIDICULOUS BECAUSE SUCH TACTICS WILL AMOUNT TO BLACKMAILING . . . BRITAIN TO RETURN GOWON TO US IN BREACH OF HER OWN LAW."
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6. COMMENT: NIGERIAN DOUBTS ABOUT THE POSSIBILITY OF EX-TRADITING GOWON ARE GROWING. AFTER MUCH EMOTIONAL TALK OF GETTING HIM BACK REGARDLESS OF CONSEQUENCES, THOUGHTFUL NIGER-IANS ARE BEGINNING TO EQUESTION DESIRABILITY OF EXTRADITION EFFORT'S SUCCESS. AS LONG AS GOWON REMAINS IN LONDON HE SERVES ADMIRABLY AS WHIPPING BOY FOR THIS REGIME AND POSSIBLE CIVILIAN SUCCESSORS. IF HE COMES BACK TO NIGERIA, FMG WILL HAVE

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TO FACE THE PROBLEM OF HOW TO DEAL WITH HIM, REALIZING HIS TRIAL AND EXECUTION OR JAIL SENTENCE WOULD CAUSE DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL UPROAR.

7. FMG IS STILL MAKING NOISES ABOUT NOT WANTING BRITISH HANDLING OF GOWON QUESTION TO AFFECT NIGERIAN-UK RELATIONS, BUT TONE IS NOT AN OMINOUS AS IT WAS A FEW WEEKS AGO. OBADANJO'S CONGRATULATORY MESSAGE TO CALLAGHAN ON HIS ELECTION AS PRIME MINISTER WAS LESS SUBTLE THAN THE EPISTLES OF MOST MAFIA DONS. LATEST STATEMENT, BY COMPARISON, BRIMS WITH ASSURANCES OF REASONABLENESS AND CONCERN FOR FAIR PLAY; SUSPENSION OF GOWON'S ALLOWANCES WAS ABOUT AS MILD A SANCTION AS FMG COULD TAKE AGAINST FORMER HEAD OF STATE. FMG SEMS TO BE AVOIDING RASH ACTIONS THAT WOULD FORECLOSE HOPE OF SECURING GOWON'S RETURN WHILE SIMULTANEOUSLY PONDERING DISADVANTAGES OF EXTRA-DITION, DEVISING SOME SUBSTITUTE PURGATORY FOR GOWON. THERE IS HINT OF POSSIBLE TRIAL//IN ABSENTIA/ IN WARNING THAT GOWON WILL NOT BE GIVEN OPEN-ENDED OPPORTUNITY TO COOPERATE.

8. TRIAL /IN ABSENTIA/ HAS SUPPORT OF YOUNG TURKS AT /NEW NIGERIA/, BUT DOES NOT SUIT MORE MATURE NIGERIANS (LIKE AWOLOWO) TRYING TO HANG ON TO TRADITIONS OF COMMON LAW. THEY HAVE COME UP WITH ALTERNATIVE OF OSTRACIZING GOWON BY DECLARING HIM WANTED, STRIPPING HIM OF RANK, PENSION, AND NIGERIAN PROPERTY. THIS WOULD BE RETREAT FROM CONFRONTATION WITH UK, BUT WOULD FULFIL FMG'S -- AND POSSIBLE CIVILIAN SUCCESSOR REGIME'S -- NEED FOR EXTERNAL SCAPEGOAT. END COMMENT.
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